# A Visual Essay on the $Kissel\ Motor\ Car\ Company$ (1906-1930)



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PREPARED FOR THE WINTER MEETING OF THE

Society for the Preservation & Appreciation of Antique Motor Fire Apparatus in America

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The authors gratefully acknowledges

### Dawn Bondhus (Wisconsin Automotive Museum, Hartford, Wisconsin)

who materially contributed to this presentation.

"That's So Hartford" Facebook pages available at https://www.facebook.com/ThatsSoHartford

"Brave Men: The Chronicles of the Hartford Fire Department" (2022)

City of Hartford, Wisconsin; 24 minute video available at 

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKk UbCLD9k

The Kisselgraph, Newsletter of the KisselKar Klub available at https://kisselkar.net/index.php/members/the-kisselgraph/

A copy of this presentation is available at <a href="https://kisselkar.net/index.php/articles/">https://kisselkar.net/index.php/articles/</a>

#### Kissel Motor Car Company (1906-1930)

Founded by Louis Kissel and run by sons William and George, the vehicles produced by Kissel are now unknown to most Americans. Over a period of 25 years, Kissel hand produced about 29,000 cars, trucks, funeral cars, taxis and other specialty vehicles. This is a feat that would be accomplished by only a few of the many auto companies doing business in United States of 1910.

Compared with the large manufacturers of the day, Kissel's production numbers were always low. Yet in the day, Kissel was a highly respected producer of well built, beautifully styled vehicles. Kissel stopped production in 1930 due to the Great Depression and loss of market share to less expensive, mass produced vehicles. Only about 200 complete Kissel vehicles exist in the world today.

Now days Kissel is most often remembered for their **Speedster**, a sporty roadster featuring "racer cut" sides and a bumble-bee or turtle-back rear deck. The design was the concept of Conover T. Silver, a New York City distributor for Kissel, and Kissel body engineer J. Frederick "Fritz" Werner. In 1918 the company introduced the Kissel Silver Special, which was received with great enthusiasm at auto trade shows. By 1920 this body style was simply called the Kissel Speedster.

W. W. "Brownie" Rowland was an automotive writer for the Milwaukee Journal. As a promotion Brownie drove a chrome-yellow Kissel Speedster around Wisconsin for a month, calling attention for the need to improve the poor roads and inviting his readers to name the car he used. A young girl allegedly coined the popular name "Gold Bug" referring to the car's color and shape.

Popular with movie stars and other celebrities, Speedsters initially featured outrigger jump seats for two passengers. Later models replaced the seats with fittings to strap a golf bag to each rear fender. It is believed that less than 3,000 Kissel Speedsters were produced from 1918-1930, and only about 40 are known to exist today.

Many Kissels are designated as Full Classic<sup>™</sup> by the Classic Car Club of America. These very special cars are "distinguished by their respective fine design, high engineering standards and superior workmanship."

But **Kissel TRUCKS** have been an untold story. In this visual essay we explore what we know about Kissel trucks and other vehicles. In particular, we look for connections of the Kissel Motor Car Company and firefighting vehicles.



The Kissel Speedster was also popularly known as the **Gold Bug**.

(Wisconsin Automotive Museum)

Many prominent people owned Kissels.

Famous **Speedster** owners include Fatty Arbuckle (comedian), Bebe Daniels (actress), Ralph DePalma (racecar champion), Eddie Duchin (band leader), Amelia Earhart (aviator), Douglas Fairbanks (actor), Greta Garbo (actress), Gladys George (actress), Ruby Keeler (actress), William S. Hart (actor), Al Jolson

(singer), Mabel Normand (actress), Mary Pickford (actress), Rudy Vallee (singer).

In a letter found in the Museum archives, George Montgomery Flagg (illustrator, creator of the Uncle Sam 'I Want YOU' US Army poster) wrote to Kissel, forwarding a sketch and the colors for his Speedster – cream/ivory body, <u>fuchsia fenders</u>, and green seat.



1921 Kissel 6-45 Speedster (car# 45-3192) owned by Andrew Heller (Fort Lauderdale, Florida)

This car was a best-in-class winner at the 2018 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. The Speedster is arguably what most people remember of Kissel today.



KISSEL AND HARTFORD BEFORE
THE KISSEL MOTOR CAR Co



Adolph Kissel

William L Kissel (9)

Otto Kissel

(Lynn Kissel)

George A Kissel (7)

Kissels had owned the Hartford Plow Works since 1882

Louis Kissel's four sons and hardware store circa 1888

The Kissels were a locally prosperous, influential and forward looking family. By 1906, Louis and his four sons Adolph, Otto, William "Will" and George would be involved in manufacturing, retailing, construction, real estate, materials and power generation in and around Hartford, Wisconsin. In twenty years, George and Will would be running the automobile company after the <u>tragic</u> death of Louis in 1908.



Hartford, Wisconsin, circa 1905.

A view of Main Street around the time of the formation of the Kissel Motor Car Company. With about 2,000 residents, Hartford's population had doubled over the last decade. The Kissel factory was sited just a few blocks from this bustling scene of activity. Hartford was growing.



KISSEL MOTOR CARS





1907 Kissel Model C

(Lynn Kissel)

The Model C was Kissel's first production car. Announced in July 1906, Kissel's 1907 model-year chassis was designed to accommodate three body types: touring (pictured here); roadster, and <u>delivery</u>. Kissel landed an exclusive 100-car marketing deal with the McDuffee Automobile Co., a prominent Chicago car dealer.

The Model C was powered by a 30-H.P, four-cylinder motor (cylinders cast in pairs). The car had a 98-inch wheelbase, 56-inch track, and weighed 2,250 pounds. Standard equipment included side lamps, set of tools, and horn. The price was \$1,850 f.o.b. Hartford, Wisconsin.

Kissel built about 140 examples of this model; none are known to survive.

#### **Oldest Known Survivors**

Ford Model T was introduced in 1908 (Oct 1 first shipments) priced as low as \$825 (20 horsepower engine on a 100" wb chassis)

Work on Kissel "1908" Models D and E begun in July 1907, more than a year earlier, and were priced at \$2,000 (35-40 horsepower engine on a 108" wb chassis)



(conceptcarz.com)

1908 Model D Touring (eng #703)

Donna Renuart (Kalamazoo, Michigan)

Kissel top management was young! After the death of Louis Kissel in August, 1908, the senior management...

George A (aged 27), William L "Will" (aged 29) ran the company

J. Friedrich "Fritz" Werner (aged 26) body engineer trained at Opal Rüsselsheim, Germany

Herman Palmer (aged 35) chief engineer educated at University of Cologne, Germany



(KisselKar Klub)

1908 Model E Roadster (eng# 733)
Gerry Groenewold (Grand Forks, North Dakota)

#### **Last Production Survivor**



1930 Model 8-95 Brougham (eng #4832) Konstantin Nikitin (Bratislava, Slovakia)

(Konstantin Nikitin)

"Kostya" Nikitin is the retired President of the Association of Collectors of Historical Vehicles in the Slovak Republic (a FIVA Member organization). Kissel entered receivership on Sep. 18, 1930, and ceased passenger car production in Nov. 1930. Calendar 1930 automobile production totaled 93 units, which includes sixteen model 1931 automobiles. (Heasley 1977)



Kissel touring bodies in production, circa 1913.

Hugo Pfau (1975) has written that Kissel craftsmanship was comparable to larger custom body shops. Kissel's largely hand-built bodies allowed adapting their body designs to varying chassis lengths with little additional tooling. In most years, Kissel offered a dizzying array of bodies types on multiple models (motor & chassis). With their low production numbers, it seems likely that some offered combinations were never actually built.



Shown is the <u>luxuriously appointed interior</u> of the Model 6-38, introduced in 1916. The All-Year Car featured a removable hard top making it either an open touring car, or an enclosed sedan. Kissel <u>boasted</u> that no expert was required for the owner to detach the removable hard top. Kissel was awarded a patent for this design.



KISSEL'S OTHER VEHICLES





Prior to July 1910, Kissel offered commercial vehicles with bodies mounted on their passenger car chassis.

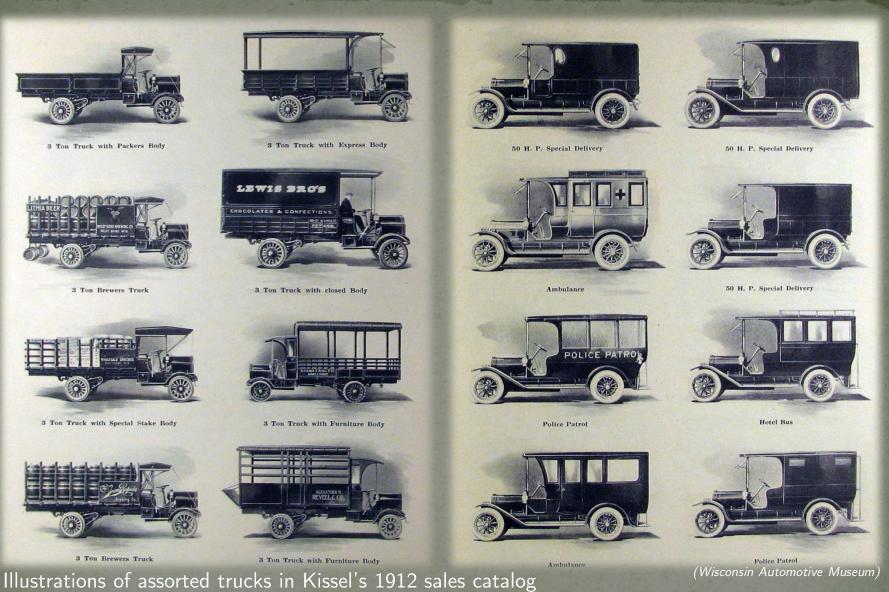


#### 1911 KisselKar 3-Ton Truck

(Wisconsin Automotive Museum)

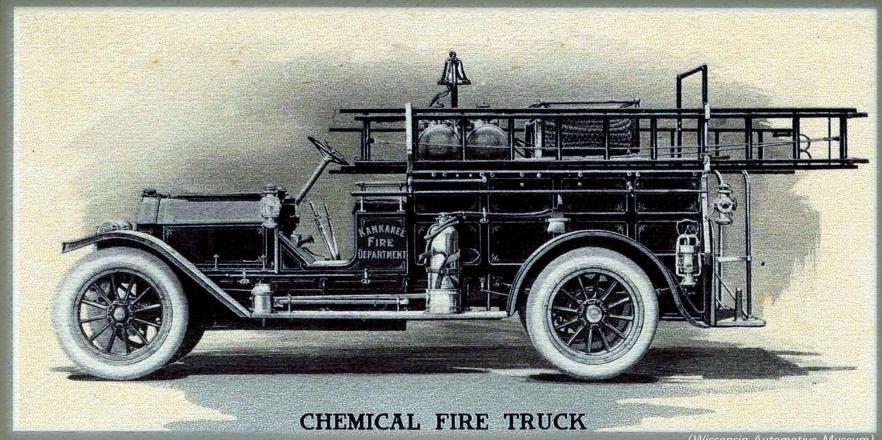
Starting in July 1910, Kissel offered 50 HP trucks with a 3-ton capacity on a dedicated 144" chassis. Capable of 12-15 MPH, these vehicles cost \$3,500 with stake body, f.o.b. Hartford, Wisconsin.

For reference, an adult Asian elephant weighs 3-5 tons.



illustrations of assorted trucks in Nissel's 1912 sales catalog

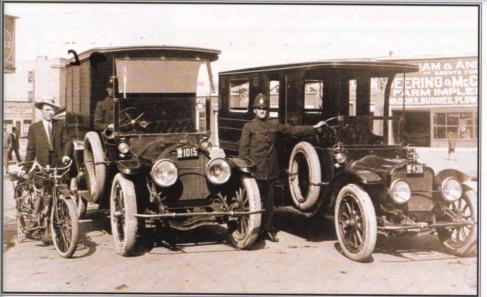
For 1912, Kissel expands their trucks offerings from 1 to 5 models with capacities of  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 5 tons, motors of 40-50 HP, and complete truck costs of  $\frac{5}{1,750-4,500}$ . Note specific names on some trucks. Assume that they could only publish these images if they were of actual trucks that they had built.



1912 KisselKar Chemical Fire Truck, Kankakee FD (Kankakee, Illinois)

(Wisconsin Automotive Museum)

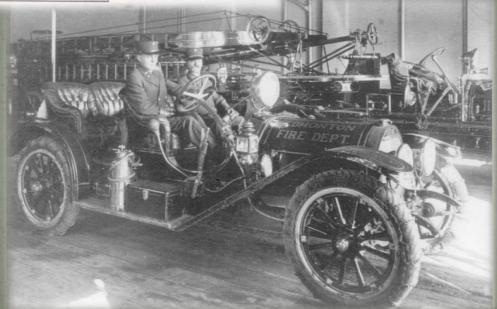
A 50-HP chemical fire truck on a 132"-wheelbase chassis is an explicit offering in Kissel's 1912 large-format sales brochure – price upon application. Guessing it is safe to assume that this truck was actually built for the City of Kankakee Fire Department.



The resolute gentlemen above, according to the archive record, constituted Edmonton's Morality Squad when Police Chief Silas Carpenter took over. Their job: to keep the lid on gambling clubs and 'disorderly houses' — more or less. The uniform of Edmonton's finest (upper left), like most Canadian police forces up into the 1930s, followed the style of Britain's 'bobbies.' At bottom, the force in 1914 was becoming motorized.

1912 KisselKar Police Paddy Wagon, Edmonton PD (lic. 1015)

The City of Edmonton, Alberta, CANADA, bought TWO 1912 Kissels.



1912 KisselKar Fire Chief's Car, Edmonton FD

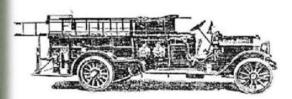
(Chris Bamford)



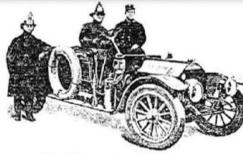
1913 KisselKar Ambulance on 1-ton chassis

(Wisconsin Automotive Museum)

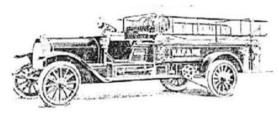
For model year 1913, Kissel issues a 15-page <u>brochure exclusively on their trucks</u>. For 13 of these pages, thumbnails for 169 individual trucks are displayed. Prompts a reevaluation of # trucks built.



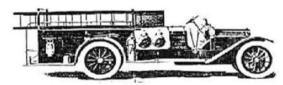
Comb. Hose and Chemical Wagon City Marshalltown, Iowa



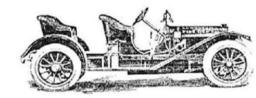
Hose Wagon-Kansas City



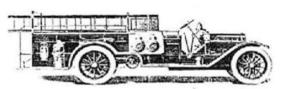
Hose Wagon-New Orleans, La.



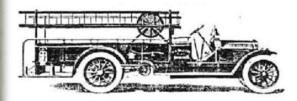
Comb. Hose and Chemical Wagon-Monroe, La.



Fire Chief's Car-Edmonton, Alta, Canada



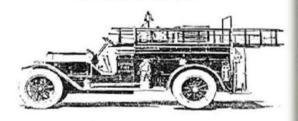
Comb. Hose and Chemical Wagon City Marshalltown, Iowa



Hose Wagon-City New Orleans, La.



Comb. Hose and Chemical Wagon City Marshalltown, Iowa



Comb. Hose and Chemical Wagon-City Kankakee, Ill.

#### Earliest KisseKar Fire Vehicles

(Wisconsin Automotive Museum)

Of the examples of bodied trucks in the 1913 KisselKar Truck sales brochure, these nine are explicitly fire vehicles. Here we see trucks for several US cities and a car for Edmonton, Alberta, CANADA.

Separately we know that Edmonton bought a 1912 Fire Chief's Car and a 1912 Police Paddy Wagon.



KisselKar trucks being finished circa 1913.

(That's So Hartford on FB)

Note the fire truck in center of the back row.

The rear lights of the trucks appear to be kerosene lamps. Kissel converted to all-electric lights on their automobiles in July 1913. This helps date the photo, although Kissel trucks evolved more slowly than their automobiles, so these trucks might be one or more years later than 1913.



1913 KisselKar Delivery Wagon – long wheelbase

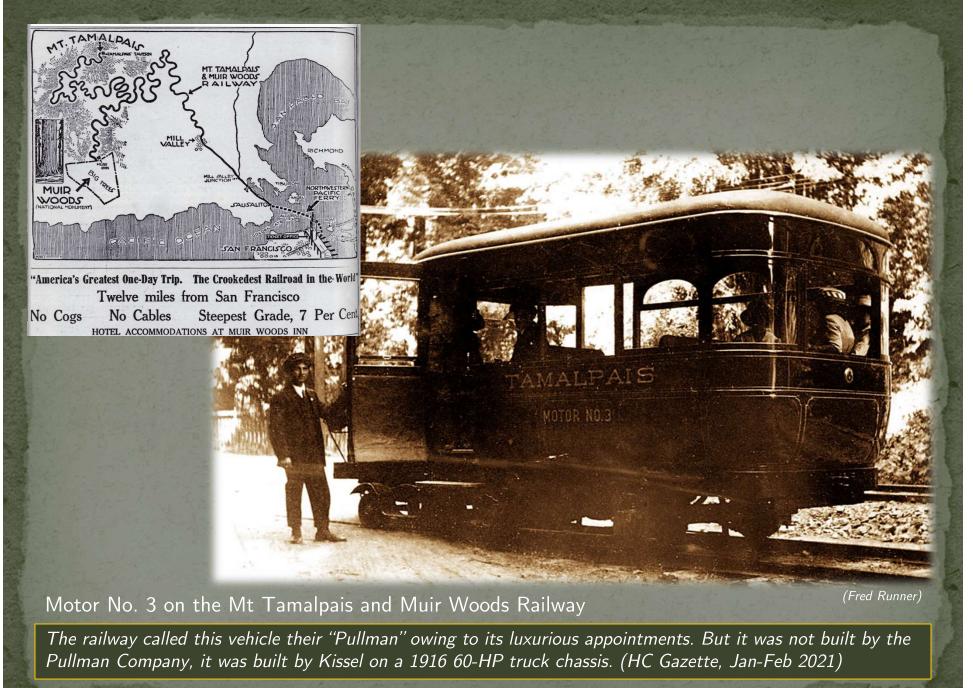
(Brian Dervin Dillon)

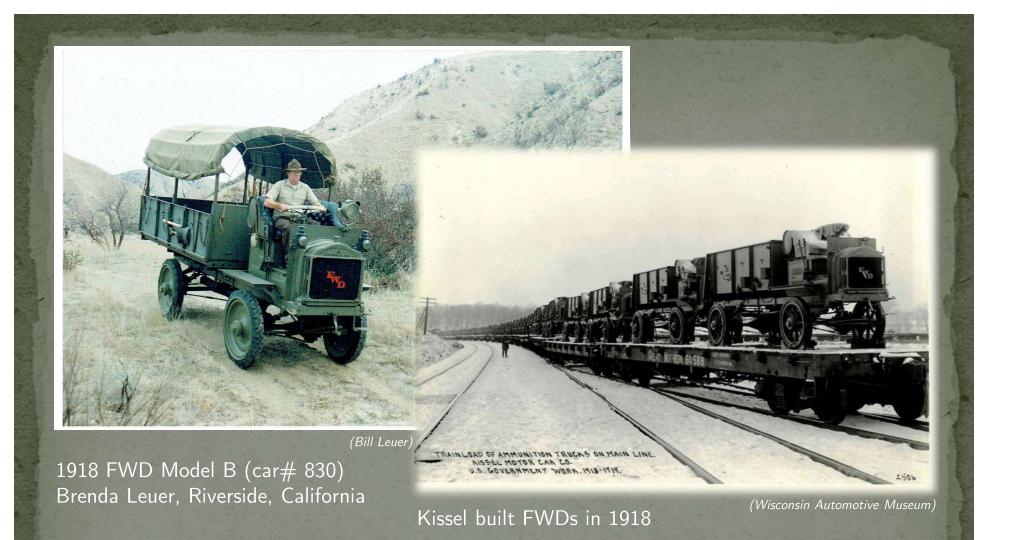
First Sergeant William T. Dillon of the 61st Coast Artillery Company, Fort Baker, Marin County, California, stands at right, with an unidentified officer at center and some of his enlisted men behind. The soldiers pose with a KisselKar truck adapted for military use as a "troop hauler." This vehicle was being tested in one of the earliest motorization evaluations by the U.S. Army. The white sheet of paper pinned to the side reads "For Field Service [Grade] 'A'." (Kisselgraph 2020#1)



1913 KisselKar 2T Truck, Ponsonby Fire Station (Auckland, NEW ZEALAND)

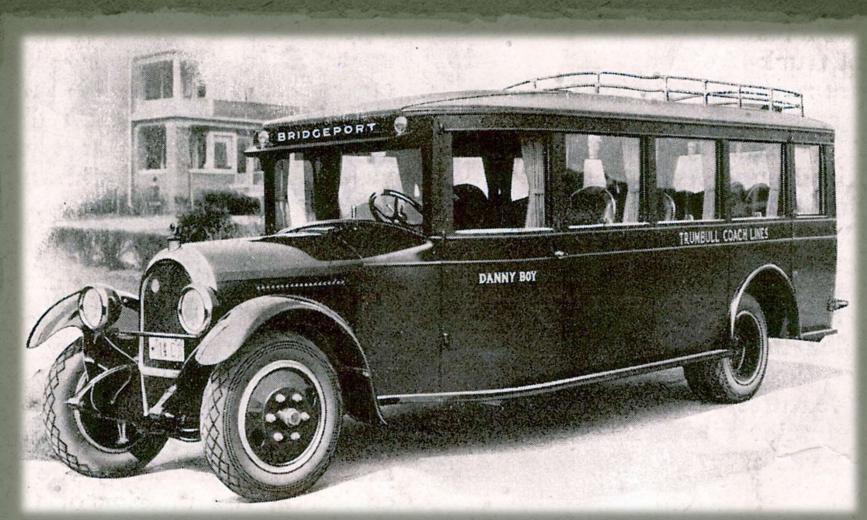
Sent by Doug Wheeler (Opotiki, NEW ZEALAND), this photograph was taken in 1919 or 1920.





Kissel manufactured 2,000 Model B1 FWD trucks under contract with the U.S. Government. Car# 830 is the only surviving Kissel-built FWD. This example was built as a mobile machine shop.

The government contracted with 18 companies to build FWDs for the Great War (WWI).



1926 Kissel Parlor Car, Safety Speed Coach

(Wisconsin Automotive Museum)

"The New Kissel Parlor Car Safety Speed Coach, Custom-built for De Luxe Travel." This medium-capacity bus was designed for city and interurban transportation. This luxurious hand-built coach offered seating for 21 passengers. It had 3 doors, 12 windows with crank regulators, and 3 roof ventilators. For cold weather travel, a 2-inch heating tube encircled the interior. (Bridgeport, Connecticut?)



(Wisconsin Automotive Museum)

1928 Kissel Model 54B Funeral Car (car# 1647), David Swope (Homer, Michigan)

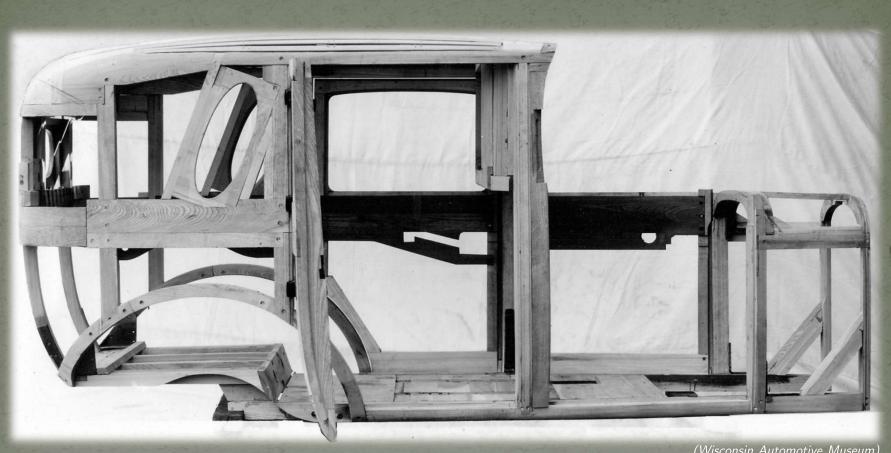
In the late 1920s, Kissel manufactured funeral cars marketed under their own name, through the Northwestern Casket Company, and as National-Kissel through the National Casket Company.



1929 Bradford Custom Built Taxicabs

(Wisconsin Automotive Museum)

Kissel made the first taxis for Milwaukee (Motor Age, Apr 1, 1909) and offered a 30 HP taxicab (Horseless Age, July 27, 1910), but this early production was apparently limited. Kissel manufactured 339 luxurious Bradford Taxicabs 1928-1930.



1929 Bradford Custom Built Taxicabs

(Wisconsin Automotive Museum)

The body framing for the Bradford Taxicab illustrates both Kissel's strength and ultimately their Achilles heel. The company was steeped in a tradition of classical coach building. It was staffed and tooled to create marvelous wooden-bodied vehicles, a labor intensive approach to building automobiles. As manufacturing technology advanced, Kissel did not abandon their coach-built heritage. Eventually they could no longer compete on price with mass-produced, steel-bodied vehicles.

#### Kissel Motor Car Company (1906-1930) – by the numbers

#### PRODUCTION – 29,000 <u>+</u> a few hundred

Calendar Year	Total	Cars	Trucks	Funeral Cars	Taxis
1906	11				
1907	193	193			
1908	212	212			
1909	417	417	40 E		
1910	619	619			
1911	753	713	40		
1912	856	727	129		
1913	988	837	151		
1914	1,057	896	161		
1915	1,384	1,173	211		
1916	1,312	1,112	200		
1917	1,909	1,618	291		
1918	2,436	1,217	1,219*		9
1919	2,389	1,177	1,212*		,
1920	2,446	1,398	1,048		
1921	829	506	323		
1922	891	809	82		
1923	2,123	2,024	99		
1924	803	748	55		
1925	2,122	2,061	57	4	
1926	1,972	1,901	52	19	
1927	1,147	1,021	50	76	· ·
1928	1,068	843	10	210	5
1929	899	416	8	190	285
1930	221	93	2	77	49
1931		1			
Totals	29,046	22,731	5,400	5 <b>7</b> 6	339

WWI

SURVIVORS – 200 <u>+</u> a few

The second second	State of the State of the	1 5 5 Y	A PARTY OF	42 152	FF 1 5-5-18 3
Model Year	Total	Cars	Trucks	Funeral Cars	Taxis
1906					
1907	-				
1908	2	2			
1909	4	4			
1910	2	2			
1911	10	9	1		
1912	8	7	1		
1913	4	4			
1914	6	4	2		
1915	4	2	2		
1916	3	1	2		
1917	6	4	2		
1918	10	7	3		
1919	5	2	3		
1920	7	4	3		
1921	5	4	1		
1922	6	6			
1923	20	18	2		
1924	5	4	1		
1925	17	15	2		
1926	19	16	3		
1927	19	19			
1928	16	13		3	
1929	18	16	1	1	
1930	6	6			
1931		-			
Totals	202	169	29	4	-

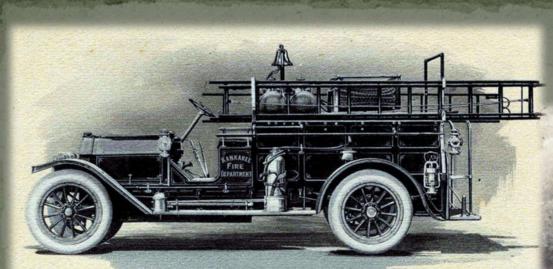
\* 2 000 FWD in 1918-1919

Year-over-year growth up to WWI. The Great War staggers Kissel and they never fully recover.



## KISSEL CUSTOM-BUILT FIRE FIGHTERS

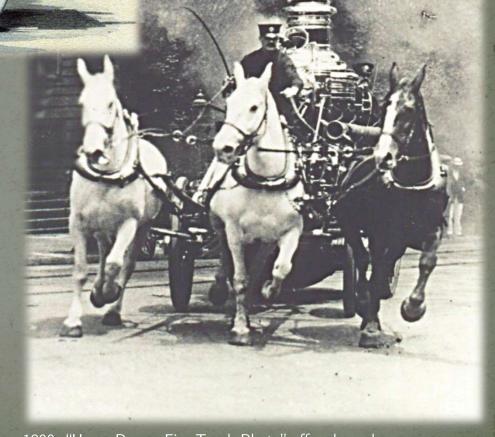




1912 KisselKar Chemical Fire Truck

Which one of these is a fire engine?

All squares are rectangles, but not all rectangles are squares.



1890s "Horse Drawn Fire Truck Photo" offered on ebay



Struck by number of images of major fires found on "That's So Hartford" on Facebook. In a devastating 1909 fire at the Kissel factory, a main building and 100 automobile bodies were lost. As the crow flies, Allenton is 7 miles outside Hartford. The town went from standing to smoldering embers in 90 minutes.



1912 KisselKar 4-50 Chemical & Hose Truck (car# 5625) Buck Kamphausen (Vallejo, California)

This vehicle was delivered to Fort Collins, Colorado, in June 1912.

Previously it was believed that this vehicle was the "<u>first motorized fire truck west of the Mississippi</u>." While certainly among the first few, we've recently been told of these earlier motorized vehicles.

- 1909 Seagrave in Pasadena, California;
- 1911 Seagrave in Handford, California;
- 1911 truck in Napa, California.



1911 KisselKar 2T Fire Engine (car# 5624), Salida FD (Salida, Colorado)

(Salida FD)

Fire Chief Doug Bess with SFD engine after its recent restoration. Chief Bess told the KisselKar Klub of Salida's restoration efforts in two articles in our newsletter (Kisselgraph 2015#1, 2019#2). The vehicle was purchased in Sep 1912 for \$5,300 from the Anderson Coupling and Fire Supply Company. (10-20 yrs wages)



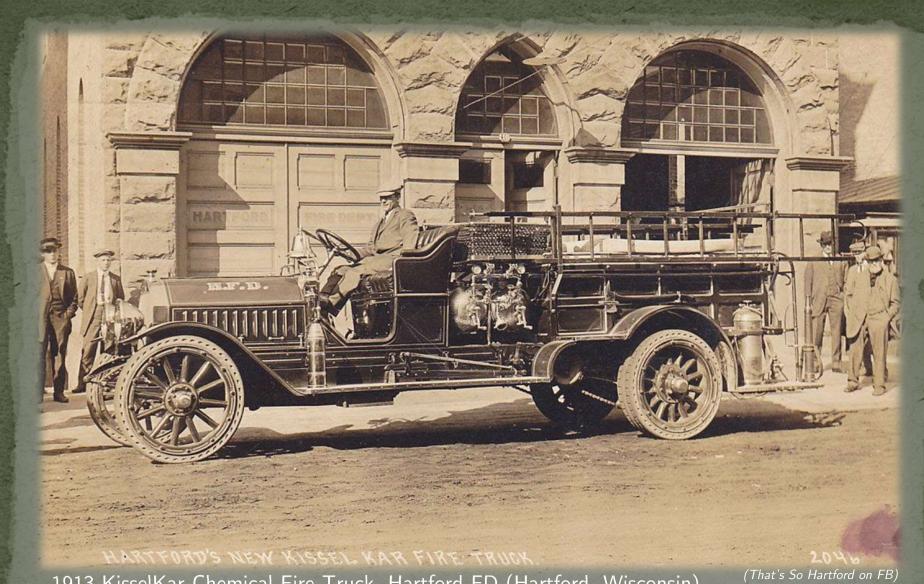
1911 KisselKar 2T Fire Engine (car# 5624), Salida FD (Salida, Colorado)

Some of the endearing photos sent to us by Chief Doug Bess of their Kissel.



1912 KisselKar 4-50 Fire Chief's Car (eng# 6206) Chris Bamford (Edmonton, Alberta, CANADA)

There's more information on Chris' restoration in the Kisselgraph (2013#2)



1913 KisselKar Chemical Fire Truck, Hartford FD (Hartford, Wisconsin)

This is the first of three Kissel fire trucks for the City of Hartford, Wisconsin, home of the Kissel Motor Car Company. Delivered to the Hartford FD on June 15, 1913.



"I have little information on my Kissel. It is a pile of parts, being front half of a chassis, motor, gearbox, steering box and column, front axle and springs, and a radiator. The rear section of the chassis was cut away and made into a trailer, moved some 200 km and subsequently lost. People I have spoken to recall it being used as an outside work bench for stripping down oily engines and parts. It was a noticeable feature due to its large wheel diameter. Identity of this particular chassis is verbal, with a known history that is traceable back to one of two new vehicles." This is a Kissel 4-40 motor.



1916 KisselKar 2-1/2T Chemical Fire Truck (car# 50403) Tony Martel & Edward Martel (Modesto, California)

(Edward Martel)

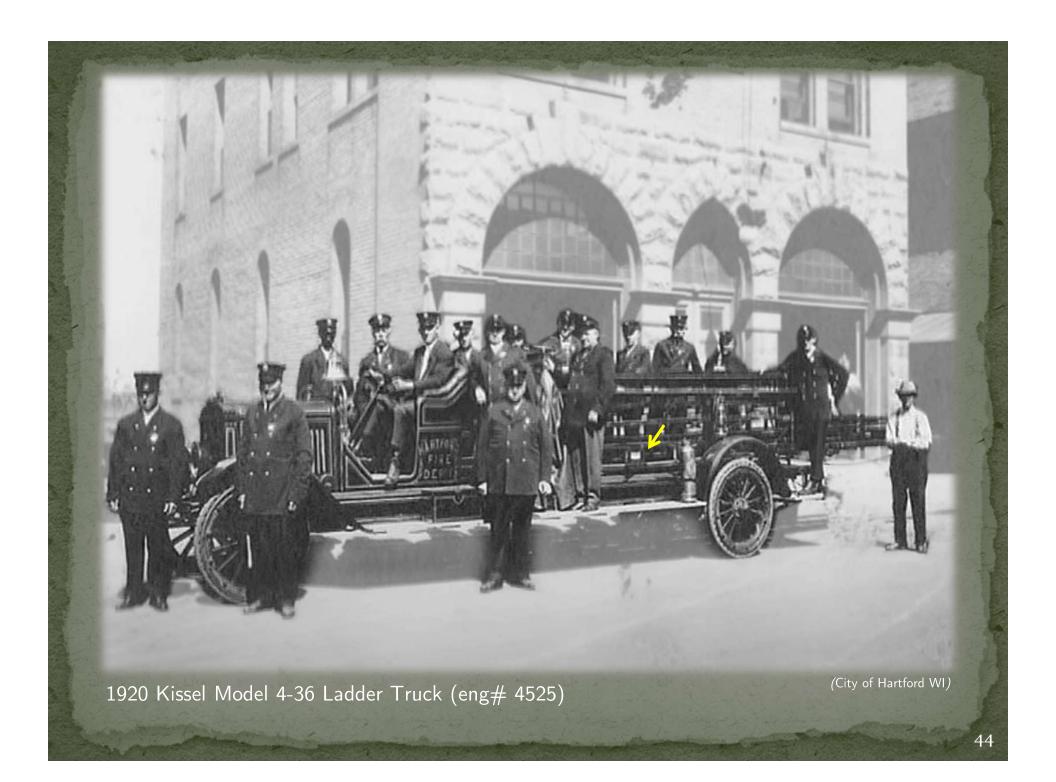
Edward Martel is chief of Montezuma Fire District (Stockton, California). He owns this fire truck with his father Tony.



Hall of Flame)

1920 Kissel Model 4-36 Ladder Truck (eng# 4525) Hall of Flame Museum (Phoenix, Arizona)

Built for the Hartford FD, this truck was built to carry the ladder rack from a 1904 Seagrave horse-drawn ladder wagon. This is the second Kissel truck that the Hartford FD acquired.





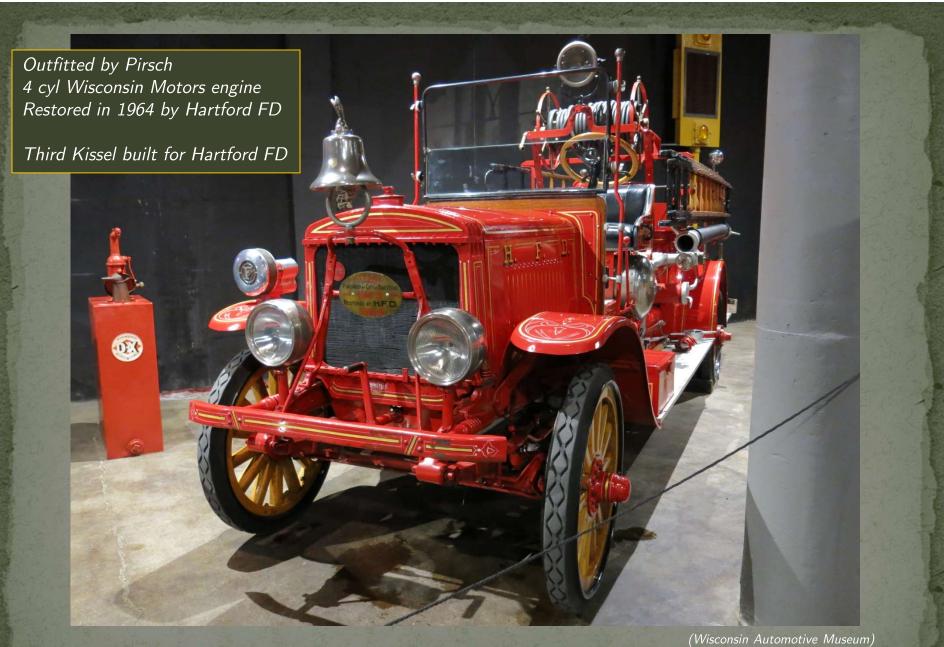




(San Francisco FD)

## 1923 Kissel Fuel Truck (car# 51527), Henry L Kissel (Malibu, California)

Paul Barry (SFFD, retired) tells us... "1923 Kissel Fuel Truck, closed C cab. Engine: Continental 6 cylinder, 50 HP. Two 250-gallon gasoline tanks and one 100-gallon tank of motor oil. In service: June 19, 1923 - October 1957. Sold at the City and County of San Francisco public auction in 1958. This truck may still be in existence as it was a fixture in San Mateo County parades in the 1980s and 1990s. The fuel tank has been removed and a rear chassis deck with hose bedsides and benches has turned this unit into a perfect group parade unit."



1923 Kissel Fire Engine (car# 51590), Hartford FD (Hartford, Wisconsin)



1923 Kissel Fire Engine (car# 51590) Hartford FD (Hartford, Wisconsin)

(Doug Kissel)

William L "Will" Kissel at 85 years old inspects Hartford FD's restored fire engine circa 1966.



1926 Kissel 2T Fire Engine (car# 52376) Juneau FD (Juneau, Wisconsin)



Does anyone recognize QFD or this truck? This truck is parked in front of the Hartford FD, near the Kissel factory. The radiator neck is like that found on 1913 and earlier Kissel automobiles but the front seat appears to be upgraded from that shown on the Chemical Fire Truck in Kissel's 1912 sales brochure. See 1913 HFD.



A FEW OF OUR FAVORITE PICTURES





1914 KisselKar 4-40 Touring (car# 15471), Lynn & Jeanne Kissel (Cameron Park, California)

Lynn & Jeanne are pictured here with "Annie." This image was captured in 2014 in Cripple Creek, Colorado, on the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary International-National Tour of the Horseless Carriage Club of America. Jeanne likes Annie best.



(Doug Kissel)

1918 KisselKar 6-38 Roadster (car# 38-5127), Doug & Sheila Kissel (Hartford, Wisconsin)

Sheila raises an approving cheer as she takes her first spin in the 1918 Roadster. Taken the day she and Doug receive the car from the previous owner, Sheila names the car "Goldie." Doug says that he is allowed to work on the car as needed.



(Lynn Kissel

1924 Kissel 6-55 Speedster (car# 55-4323), John Noel (Stevens Point, Wisconsin)

Pictured in 2012 in Pebble Beach, California. Originally built for an Australian customer, Lynn and Jeanne brought this car back to the U.S. and restored it. Special RHD for 1924, all Kissels before 1914 were RHD.



(DougKissel)

1925 Kissel 6-55 Enclosed Speedster (car# 55-4323), Doug & Sheila Kissel (Hartford, Wisconsin)

Doug and Sheila call this car "the Pumpkin." They acquired the car in 2000. While he soon got the car functional, Doug's more serious restoration efforts started more recently with his retirement. He feels he's addressed the last big issue in 2022. (But restorations are never really completely done.)



(Wisconsin Automotive Museum)

1927 Kissel 8-75 Brougham (car# 75-5436), Doug & Sheila Kissel (Hartford, Wisconsin)

Doug and Sheila acquired this car in 2019 and call it "Blue Bell." In this photo, they are driving the car in the 2022 Hartford Christmas Parade. They earned an award for their effort.



(John Maniford)

1929 Kissel 8-95 White Eagle Tourster (car# 95-1504), Lynn & Jeanne (Cameron Park, California)

Lynn & Jeanne are pictured with "Miss Amy," seen here on the 2022 Nickel Age Tour in Moscow, Idaho. Lynn is fond of this flashy car. He feels it has a bit of the Speedster's personality, but it's way more comfortable.



(Doug Kissel)

1929 Kissel 8-95 White Eagle Coupe Roadster (car# 95-1603), Doug & Sheila Kissel (Hartford, Wisconsin)

Here we see Doug & Sheila's 1929 on display in the Wisconsin Automotive Museum. They call this one "the Eagle."